

Interview with Jim Coan, March 2003

What are your long-term professional goals, dreams, and hopes (e.g., is there any "mark" you'd like to make professionally)?

My long term goal is to secure a faculty position in a reasonably good research oriented university. Beyond that, I suppose it is true that I'd like to leave a "mark" of some kind, preferably on the field of emotion. I am very interested in measurement issues, particularly the measurement of emotion as a construct, and the ways in which psychophysiological measures contribute to the construct validity of emotion.

You are applying exclusively for faculty positions and have not applied for any postdoc positions. Would you comment on why you decided to apply for faculty positions only?

I was advised by a number of people to "go for it." In my particular case, I have published a fair amount, so several advisors felt that I had a reasonably good chance of securing a faculty position right out of graduate school. As it is, I only applied to a limited number of jobs this year, all of which I would consider ideal for me, or nearly so, as well as for my wife. Thus far, this is not looking like a particularly winning strategy.

Did you always know (from your first year in grad school) that you would apply for a faculty position? If not, when did you first consider the idea in a serious way?

Since beginning graduate school, I have wanted to get a faculty position, because I love academic life. On the other hand, it may be fair to say that I am seriously considering the idea of getting a faculty position only now as I find myself competing for one. The reason for this is that the idea of completing graduate school and going on the job market has until now been rather abstract. I have begun to visit schools for job interviews, and the process is a great deal more complicated and overwhelming than my idealized fantasies prepared me for. Thus, only now, when so many more of the implications are clearly visible, can I really say that I'm making a deliberate and serious decision to continue down this road. Trust me on this: it is hard to prepare adequately for this phase of academic life. Considerations ranging from where to apply to what one should wear at job interviews to how to negotiate with deans regarding start-up funds quickly multiply, and the process of applying for jobs is characterized by long periods of stultifying, nearly intolerable waiting and uncertainty, punctuated by bursts of frenzied interactions with a dizzying array of potential new colleagues (at job interviews). And in truth, the bursts of frenzy only happen if you're lucky. Add to this mixture the occasional pie in the face that is the rejection form-letter, and you've got yourself quite a year to endure. Honestly, this year hasn't been bad enough to discourage me from pursuing a faculty position, but it has inspired me to...let's say pause and reflect.

How have you gone about your search process? What characteristics of a department attract you most?

The truth is that I hadn't originally intended to apply for positions this year. I have written a grant that may fund me for another several years here at Arizona, and I have other considerations that make this year "non-optimal" for job searching. Nevertheless, this year a handful of jobs (seven) came open that I simply felt I could not afford to pass up if there was even the faintest possibility of getting them. These jobs were at schools that, for me, were the sort of academic versions of heaven. That is why I did not send out applications to a large number of schools this year—I only applied to the positions that I considered absolutely and deliriously the best. I am reaching for the academic pie in the

sky, which is, of course, why I risk not being hired anywhere at all this round. These are tough jobs to get, for anyone.

As for attractive departmental characteristics, I'd say that the top of the list would be a clear emphasis on research and teaching, with a slightly greater emphasis on research. Being a clinical psychologist, it would also be nice, but not absolutely necessary, to be in a department with a good, rigorously science-based clinical program. Other considerations include place, cost of living, etc. For example, UC Berkeley (whose rejection letter seemed to have been sent to me even before my application crossed the border into California) has all of the characteristics I would want in a department, plus an outstanding place to live: the Bay Area. I would say that all of the places I applied to this year were, in terms of the characteristics I've described above, either at or very close to my ideal. Thus far, I haven't been unequivocally rejected by any of the schools other than UC Berkeley, but there is ample time left for that.

Are there any aspects of the faculty position that scare you? (E.g., do you feel prepared at this stage to set up your own program of research, teach your own classes, and mentor graduates and undergrads)? Which aspects of a faculty position most excite you?

Honestly, I feel prepared for most of the duties that await me in any faculty position. I'm mainly frightened of the potential teaching load and of the prospect of making an ass of myself on some kind of committee. If the teaching load is high, it is going to be difficult to remain productive and competitive. As for committees, my fear is probably irrational. It must derive from the fact that I have a healthy fear of looking like a jerk in front of my faculty peers (who doesn't?) coupled with the additional fact that committees offer excellent opportunities for such things.

The thing that excites me most is probably the prospect of working with graduate students, both as a mentor and instructor. I am very excited to teach in the context of a graduate seminar, where the level of discussion can be highly stimulating for all involved. For similar reasons, I am looking forward to establishing rich intellectual relationships with graduate students. I think that the graduate student/mentor relationship may be the single most important source of intellectual stimulation for all involved throughout academic careers. It's a context within which diverse interests and experiences converge to create, in many cases, very original and exciting work.

You were offered two postdocs. What considerations would lead you to take a postdoc instead of a faculty position? Are there other professional options you would consider doing for employment if you do not make a desired match with a faculty position or postdoc within a preferred timeframe (e.g., would you work in an applied setting, in industry, on a grant, etc.)?

Obviously, a faculty position would be my preference. On the other hand, there are many very desirable things about postdoc positions. In most cases, though the pay is lousy, postdocs allow you to do your research all day, every day, without having to worry about setting up your own lab, teaching classes, sitting on committees and so on. Also,

postdocs often provide an opportunity to work with an eminent scholar in some particular field. Such experiences can be invaluable for a lot of reasons, all of which probably enhance your career prospects. That would certainly be the case for me in either of the postdocs I am considering.

As for other options, yes, I am considering some in the private sector. In the last year, I have learned that there are many such options available if one is willing to keep an open mind. I may have the opportunity to use my statistical knowledge in the case of one employment opportunity, and my expertise in observational emotion coding in another. Still, I regard such opportunities as supplemental at best. I would not want to do either of them full time. I am too interested in academia for that. A friend of mine recently worked to convince me that I could make much more money in the private sector than I could in academia, and I have no doubt that he is right. But the private sector just doesn't squeak my duck, as they say. I still believe that research conducted at the university level is one of the most exciting and useful things that a person can do. I love the rigor of academia and would not trade the intellectual environment of the university for anything. On the other hand, I am definitely willing to supplement my income with the occasional private sector foray. I'll think of it as money I can use to support my research habit.

Who/what have been your greatest sources of information, support, etc. in your application and interviewing process?

Without question, my faculty advisor, mentor and friend, John Allen, has been the greatest source of information and support through all this. In addition to John, Lee Sechrest, Al Kaszniak, Varda Shoham and John Gottman have all been a great help, and Richie Davidson at the University of Wisconsin has been very influential. There is also a wonderful paper by Bill Iacono on the whole process of applying for a faculty position that I highly recommend. Bill's candor in that piece is hilarious, harrowing and hopeful all at the same time, just like applying for jobs.

Here is the citation: Iacono, W. G. (1981). The academic job search: The experiences of a new Ph.D. in the job market. *Canadian Psychology*, 22, 217-226.

Is there anything else you would like to add about what it is like to be at this stage in your professional career?

Yes. This stage of one's career, despite the occasional bursts of hopefulness and optimism, is hell. It is characterized by frustration, uncertainty and demoralization, and the uncertainty is probably the least enjoyable component of that unholy triad. A big part of the problem is the wait. Even though it was demoralizing to be so speedily and summarily rejected by UC Berkeley, I must say I appreciate the fact that I was told right away. In most other cases, I've heard nothing for months. This is agony to someone who, like me, does not tolerate uncertainty well. (I ask for certainty every year at Christmas, and am starting to suspect that there is no Santa Claus.)

I guess we'll see what happens.

